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ABSTRACT

According to author David Roohnik, the "tragedy of logos" refers to the condition of having a "logos" (meaning a view of the rational structure of the world) and colliding with its limits and limitations. The tragedy of logos arises when some event or experience shows that things are otherwise, because tragedy entails the intersection between persons feeling themselves to be agents of what happens to them and finding themselves directed by circumstances beyond their control, according to the ancient Greeks. Networked computers make it possible for students to grow, experiencing productive tragedies of logos, wherein they realize the limits of their understanding and are in a position to reflect on those limits, accept responsibility, and then acknowledge that that diversity and unassimilated otherness they discovered is not accounted for and must be given its due. In a networked classroom, students were asked to read an essay which identified a number of features of language use in the culture that reinforce pejorative attitudes toward women and respond on the classroom's disk to the essay's claims. During open lab hours students read what other students wrote--sometimes finding relief when they learn that classmates share their perspective--and then wrote a short response indicating what they had learned from this exercise in confrontation of their logos and revisions of their assumptions. Thus networked computers can promote productive "tragedies of logos" in writing classrooms. (Contains 7 references.) (CR)

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The Tragedy of Logos: Networked Computer Classrooms and Contact with Strange Discourse Worlds

In the following paper I intend to articulate how networked computers facilitate constructive interactions in the contact zone of our writing classrooms. In doing so, I am going to take advantage of David Roochnik's idea of the "tragedy of logos," which is defined in the "Introduction" to his book, The Tragedy of Reason. In his introduction, Roochnik explains that the tragedy of logos refers to the condition of having a logos and colliding with its limits and limitations (13). In order to understand what he means, we need to return to the ancient Greek understanding of the word logos. In The Sophistic Movement, G. B. Kerferd indicates, there were three related meanings for logos utilized in classical Greece. First, logos meant "words," "talk," "discourse," "argument," and other references to language and to linguistic formulation; second, logos referred to thought, reasoning, and mental processes; and third, logos denoted the rational structure of the world out there, what Kerferd describes as "the area of the world, that about which we are able to speak and think, hence structural principles, formulae, natural laws and so on" (Kerferd 83). Based upon this understanding of the word logos, then, it is possible for us to say, as Scott Consigny says, that when we present a discourse to others, we are also offering "an account that renders the world comprehensible or intelligible" (227).

Thus, to be discursive is also to be rendering an account of how the world is. It is to be "in" logos, and therefore to be simultaneously utilizing the

logic that fosters this discourse. As one can discern, the recursive problem being discursive sets up is when one has a logos, one has a way of making the world comprehensible; yet one may also be blinded to the limits of this logic precisely because it does make so much sense (16-17). The realization of this blindness is what Roochnik refers to as the "tragedy of logos." And, it appears that this understanding of the limits of logos is one sophists like Gorgias understood and made part of their rhetorical theory. Scott Consigny indicates, for example, that Gorgias believed that "one is always within a framework of logos and can never perceive 'reality' directly, for the domain of discourse permits no access to any putative domain that is posited to exist 'outside' the reality fabricated from within logos" (228).

Consequently, to have a logos constrains the user of it because it dictates what will be possible to say, how one will be "rational," and therefore how one will be able to "construct" the world. As a result, one cannot be objective outside any discourse. As Scott Consigny further explains, "one does not accept one's logos because it is rational; rather, one accepts certain positions as rational because he [or she] has already accepted the criteria imbedded in [that] logos" (230). Logos, in other words, rather than providing an immutable standard upon which to base our actions, sets us up to be guided by its logic, which itself may seem to reflect the rational structure of the world. Logos (any logos, we can say) can thus fool us into believing that our way of reasoning about (and therefore acting upon) what transpires in the world is based upon what actually does happen in the world.

The tragedy of logos arises when some event or experience shows us that things are otherwise, for as Roochnik reminds us, tragedy entails the intersection between feeling ourselves to be agents of what happens to us and finding ourselves directed by circumstances beyond our control (3). From

Aristotle's perspective, the tragic hero suffers a peripeteia, or turn in fortune, due to hamartia, or a mistake in judgment. However, David Roochnik adds that :

The hero's hamartia . . . is not the sole or sufficient cause of the reversal. The hero is implicated in a world, in a network of causes and effects, that is not exclusively of his making. There is a dimension of 'necessity' or 'fate' in the hero's life. His [sic] catastrophe is thus as much a consequence of his necessary involvement in a world beyond his control as it is of his own action.

(3)

The tragic individual, therefore, is not tragic because they have suffered at the hands of an impersonal fate; their circumstances are tragic because the fate they suffer is a result of the consequences of their actions carried out with an ignorance of that which is beyond their capacities of comprehension.

To exemplify what he means, Roochnik turns to the tragedy of Oedipus. When we review what happens to Oedipus, Roochnik suggests, we realize that Oedipus suffers not because he is a victim only of forces beyond his control; rather, Oedipus represents the typical tragic hero who "misjudges the boundary that separates his [sic] role as the author of his destiny from his role as victim of that which is beyond his control" (5). Roochnik reinforces this point with the illustration of someone living in a room of four walls beyond which they have never gone. In order to learn that there is an existence beyond these four walls, the person has to come into contact with the limits of the four walls. The walls, then, become the basis for making decisions about the way the world is; yet, if the person reaches or realizes the limits of the four walls, the new comprehension creates a problem because the world as originally conceived now conflicts with the way it now appears to be. We can ignore this

new understanding, but the nagging feeling will be with us that something new has been revealed. This process of realization, accordingly, is the basis for the tragedy of logos: we assume that we know what we are talking about only to find, tragically, that we do not.

With the following example, I hope to show how networked computers make it possible for our students to experience productive tragedies of logos, or perhaps even tragedies of logoi. In saying this I am wanting to suggest that to have a tragedy of logos is to have the sort of insight suggested by definitions of critical thinking. One such definition is offered to us by Lester Faigley in Fragments of Rationality, where he writes that developing the insight of an ethical subjectivity requires "accepting responsibility for judgment. It is a pausing to reflect on the limits of understanding. It is respect for diversity and unassimilated otherness. It is finding the spaces to listen" (239). I believe Faigley's articulation of critical thinking offers a summary of what it means "to suffer" a tragedy of logos: to realize the limits of one's understanding and to be in a position to reflect on the limits of that understanding, accept responsibility, and then acknowledge that that diversity and unassimilated otherness we have discovered is not accounted for and must be given its due, especially if we are to grow. I believe that networked computers can help foster such growth in students, as I hope the following will illustrate.

I have been teaching writing for the past several years at Illinois State University in a networked classroom of Macintosh computers linked by a common server. Recently I asked my students to read Robin Lakoff's essay "You Are What You Say" from the reader Contexts and Communities (Greenberg and Comprone) for homework. In that essay, Lakoff identifies a number of features of language use in our culture that reinforce pejorative attitudes toward women. Included are examples of semantic (the use of lady,

for example, rather than woman) and syntactic features (the use of tag questions by woman themselves rather than the more confident sounding flat statements) that connote a timidity not found in those characteristics of semantics and syntax associated with men. After reading her essay, I asked the class to respond to Lakoff's claims in a short writing that they could bring to the classroom and save on the "classroom disk," the space on the classroom server where all of the files created in the class can be saved and accessed by others.

Having saved their responses to the classroom disk, I then asked the students to come into the classroom during the open lab hours, access the folder containing the saved papers, and read one another's responses to Lakoff. With this reading in mind, I then asked the students to write a short response indicating what they had learned. One of the students wrote about the insights she had gained about herself and the world around her. She wrote:

I agreed with Lakoff that language tends to differ between men and women. I knew this was true, but I never really realized how much it is done until reading this essay. I am now much more aware of the fact that the genders do indeed speak and communicate differently. This is not by choice, but is caused by society. Society expects women to act "feminine" and this prevents them from speaking bluntly and with authority. I was glad to see that some of my classmates agreed with me on this fact. I would have thought that many would tend to disagree and would criticize Lakoff, saying she is being unreasonable and a radical feminist.

Of all the interesting moments in this paragraph, one of the more interesting for me is the relief this student finds when she learns that her classmates share a similar perspective as she, one not as "radical" as she had

assumed. This insight is particularly important since she had already decided that her classmates would find Lakoff "unreasonable and a radical feminist," implicating her own views as unreasonable in the process. I suspect that this student had begun to develop strategies for maintaining an external silence in the face of this perceived opposition. What was revealed to her instead was the possibility of speaking up because Lakoff's analysis of language use was shared by others. In summary, then, we could say that this student had a logos--a way of thinking, a discourse, and perhaps even a world view--about Lakoff's essay and the world into which it would be received. In this world, the very meaningful way Lakoff had expressed what the student also had experienced would be forced within because such discourse is "unreasonable." Fortunately, she found the world constituted differently by reading the responses of her classmates, reflecting on the limits of her own understanding, then acknowledging the "undifferentiated otherness" (in this case, a more publicly shared perspective she values) that had heretofore been unaccounted for.

Although the "tragic fall" in this example varies from the tone of the tragic fall of a character like Oedipus, it does show how an easier access to the discourse of classmates leads to unrealized vocalization and to the development of a critical awareness untapped before. There was, however, a consciousness raising moment for one of the men in the class that does seem to resonate better. This student also found himself confronting the limitations of his understanding and revising his assumptions in the face of a new awareness. However, the transformation of his thinking was a bit more radical. When this student first read Lakoff's essay and considered her argument, he wrote in response that he thought Lakoff wrong because "She claims that if women conform to this type of language, they are considered unassertive and unable to think for themselves . . .". Those women are, he contends, merely trying to

clarify themselves; and the problems with vocabulary are a case of society merely needing to catch up by finding new words to fill in for new situations. As he summarized the point later, Lakoff is just trying to be "another example of a feminist trying to create an issue where there really wasn't one."

This position altered, however, after he read his classmates' responses on the network, especially the responses of the women in the class. In the later written reflection on this reading, he commented:

After reading many of the responses on Lakoff's essay on women coming across as being inferior when it comes to speaking, I have changed my view almost 180 degrees. When I first read the [assigned] essay I thought that it was just another example of a feminist trying to create an issue where there really wasn't one and trying to make men look like trash. I never realized that females actually speak this way, or that males talk to them in a different way because they are females. Reading the responses of different females in the class has changed my mind on this issue. I guess you never know what someone is experiencing until you spend some time in their position. That will be a little rough for me considering I am not female. I will just have to believe what they have written and try to treat females in the same way that I would treat anyone else.

What I find particularly interesting in this paragraph is this student's discovery that his way of comprehending the world is not ubiquitous. The result is a tragedy of logos because his way of conceiving the world and language use is not inclusive of all those who are reasonable. Some with reason will affirm what the "unreasonable feminist" asserts, and the credibility of their affirmation leads him to realize he must reconsider. This revision

transforms the assumption that the world is constituted of feminists "trying to create an issue where there really wasn't one and trying to make men look like trash" by substituting instead a vision in which "I never realized that females actually speak this way, or that males talk to them in a different way because they are females." This student, then, has gained a tragic comprehension that is leading to a greater wisdom.

Thus, these examples illustrate for me how networked computers can promote productive "tragedies of logos" in writing classrooms. In addition, they also promote what is productive about Mary Louise Pratt's idea of contact zones, what she defines as spaces where cultures meet and clash (34). In such zones students and teachers learn that the classroom is often not a place where "Despite whatever conflicts or systematic social differences might be in play, . . . all participants are engaged in the same game and the game is the same for all players" (Pratt 38). Rather, they learn that such places are spaces where conceptions of how the world operates are found to be situated and contextual. And although what I am presenting here may not be limited to the networked classroom--that is, papers can be collected and housed at a commonly accessible site such as a library reserve desk--the networked classroom does more readily support the positive effects of learning in the contact zone, especially where tragedies of logos lead to realizations that our ways of constructing the world are limited by what we tell ourselves and attempt to tell others. In this case, what the computer network made possible was for one student to realize a context for her internalized voice, and for another to see that the world is more heterogeneous than he had previously imagined.

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